

# My dad's about-face journey with Covid

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*Reporter's note: This article was written with the input of my sisters Andrea and Heather, along with our mom, Carmen. We realize that, sadly, there are so many tragic Covid stories out there at this time. This story deserves no more attention than any other, but it's close to home, as it is our family's story.*

"I'm so sorry. I was wrong," Dad told my mom about a week before gasping his last painful breath on Nov. 17, 2021. He was 81. A very young 81, as anyone who knew him would attest.

Just a month earlier, he'd finished cutting wood for the winter with his good pal Larry, had taken a road trip to Branson with my mom (his wife of 60 years), and was about to start rehearsals for a Christmas cantata he planned to direct at church.

Somewhere along the way he and my mom were infected with Covid, most likely the Delta variant. Neither were vaccinated.

They didn't believe vaccinations were necessary, often stating that Covid had been blown out of proportion. "More people die of the flu every year," my dad would tell me. No, they weren't going to get vaccinated and felt it was their American right not to. Just this past September, Mom and Dad took part in a protest in Wadena. My dad held a sign that said, "Stop the Mandate."

Everything he read and listened to solidified his beliefs that Covid-19, although real, was not as serious as many in Washington would lead you to believe. "We can't quit living," Dad would often say when there were mandatory shut-downs throughout the state.

When they started getting sick this past October, my parents were convinced they simply had bad colds. "We get this crud every year," they told me and my sisters who were suspicious it might be the dreaded coronavirus and had urged them to get tested.

We're fine, Dad would say in his usual confident voice, reminding me that he'd never spent a day in the hospital and certainly didn't have plans to start now. I wanted to believe him. He was my dad.

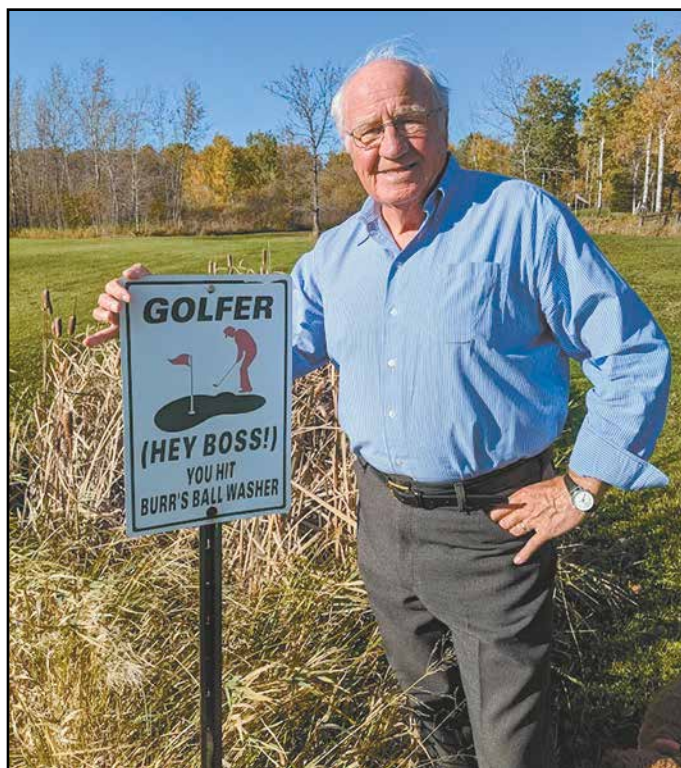
The bad colds weren't going away, however, and my mom finally agreed to go to urgent care at Lakewood Health System Hospital in Staples, where she learned she had a bad sinus infection and was prescribed an antibiotic. "And there's some Covid, too," she told me as an afterthought. But because her oxygen levels were good, there was no reason to be alarmed, she said. That was Oct. 30.

By Nov. 1, both of my parents had lost their sense of taste and smell, were coughing even more, and barely had energy to go get the mail. Dad jokingly texted his daughters with a photo of his recliner chair. "My new best friend," he wrote. "Been spending a lot of time together. But we are on the mend. Not to worry." Signed, DOD (Dear Old Dad).

But all of us had every reason to worry, as it was clear in our conversations with them that they were deteriorating...and fast. Dad continued to hold to the belief that "he could kick this," Mom said, but as she became weaker and weaker, she felt desperate for help.

My parents' niece, Terri, told them about the monoclonal antibodies treatment that had helped her friend recover. It was available at Tri-County Health Care Hospital in Wadena, if you qualified. Thank God Mom did and received the treatment on Nov. 3.

Mom was already feeling a bit better the day after her treatment and urged my dad to get tested so he could get the monoclonal antibodies as well. "There's no charge," she assured him, telling me later that they'd been concerned about the potential cost.



## 'Healthy as a horse'

This photo of Gary Schimpp was taken Oct. 16, following the memorial service for his brother, Russ. Although "healthy as a horse" at that time, as his doctor described him, a month later Gary died of Covid.

My 'never been sick in his life' dad was feeling so crummy at this point, and upon learning the treatment was free, was willing to get tested. On Nov. 4, he did indeed test positive for Covid-19 and was scheduled to receive the monoclonal antibodies treatment the next morning. That never happened.

Sometime during the night my dad had fallen, attempting to walk upstairs. He was so weak at this point and struggling to breathe, due to low oxygen levels. My mom found him the next morning and called their friend, Laurie (who'd recently recovered from Covid), about driving them to the hospital. By the time they arrived at Tri-County, Dad was in pretty bad shape and immediately admitted as a patient. Room #103 would be his home for the next 12 days.

### Talking with his doctor

"Outside of Covid, he was healthy as a horse," Dr. Stephen Davis, dad's doctor at Tri-County Health Care, said about him a few weeks after his passing. "He was a great guy...I wish I could be having a beer with him instead of doing this article."

Of course, Dad would have ordered a root beer, but I too wish he and his doctor could have met after the fact to shoot the breeze. Although my dad wore a red MAGA hat and Dr. Davis is a die-hard Democrat, I think they would have hit it off.

It's unfortunate a public health issue like Covid has been politicized. "It's insane," Dr. Davis said. "We've become so tribal...this red vs. blue crap."

The political dissension that's permeated the world upset my mother greatly. Months before they'd gotten sick she prayed fervently, "God, I just want the truth."

This wasn't the truth she'd been seeking.

In the midst of all this dissension, it's increasingly harder to ignore the statistics that over 800,000 people have died from Covid-19 in the United States alone, and that number is sure to rise unless the population takes the necessary precautions. "Wear a mask. Social distance. Get vaccinated." The virus knows no political color.

"Immunizations have been with us for hundreds of years and this current one is very safe," Davis said of the Covid-19 vaccine. "This is not an experimental drug...it's been in the works for decades." He doesn't understand why people who are against Covid vaccinations aren't anti-ALL vaccinations. "It doesn't make sense."

The Right-wing ideology that's been going around is crazy, Davis said, adding that you have to trust science and the facts.

"Your dad exemplified the whole being wrong thing," Davis said, mentioning Facebook and various news sources. Dad thought Covid was no worse than a cold, that it'd been blown out of proportion, the



## Medical angels

Dustin Peterson, a Registered Nurse at Tri-County Health Care Hospital in Wadena, attended to Gary Schimpp who was being treated for Covid pneumonia. During his 12-day stay at the hospital, Gary was grateful for the excellent care he received from his nurses and physician, Dr. Davis.

doctor said.

It didn't take long for my dad to learn just how serious it was. Davis recalled the day he said to him, "This is bad stuff. I'm pretty sick."

Dad was in the hospital nearly two weeks and his Covid-fight followed the typical course, Dr. Davis said. "After 10 - 12 days a patient either gets worse or better." In Dad's case, as the Covid-pneumonia continued to attack his lungs, he got worse.

There'd been a glimmer of hope early on. Davis recalled that midway through my dad's time at Tri-County, his CRP (C-reactive protein) levels had gotten better. "We're turning the corner," the doctor had thought. Eventually they got really high again, indicating inflammation of the lungs.

Dad's treatment had included remdesivir and the steroid decadron, the latter of which probably helped him the most, Davis said. As his condition worsened, my dad was requiring higher and higher amounts of oxygen and the next step would have been intubation, which he did not want.

It's at that point that my father gave up. He told his doctors and nurses he was ready to meet his Maker. He hugged his wife (who'd been allowed to visit him in person the last few days) and through tears, apologized for being wrong about the vaccine.

### Feeling betrayed

Dr. Davis said Dad was very upset about things he'd previously believed about Covid and the vaccine. He told him he'd been given misinformation, been lied to and betrayed.

Davis gets angry when he hears a media personality spouting off information that's not true, or downplaying the importance of the vaccine. For instance, Fox News mandates that all of their employees are immunized, Dr. Davis says during our interview. "So

how can they have a different message?" he asked.

My dad was an avid reader and deep thinker. A committed Christian, he attempted to base his decisions on what he believed were biblical values. He was influenced by certain charismatic radio personalities that preached an anti-vaccination message.

I recently found a note he'd left me a while back to listen to a segment on 'The American Policy Roundtable' that aired in late 2020. This particular episode, 'Covid Chronicles Episode #24, Back to the Beginning,' is the sort of narrative that shaped my dad's view of this pandemic.

The show seemed to go to great lengths to downplay the severity of the virus. Although it was too late to discuss the program with my dad, I decided to listen to it, and took some notes just as he often did.

I ran by some of the key points they made with Dr. Davis, including one that 98 - 99 percent of those infected with Covid-19 will recover. "True," Dr. Davis said. "But, what if you are one of the 1 - 2 percent death rate? If you infect 400 million people and one percent die, is that acceptable?" Davis asked.

My dad was in the high-risk age group (70s and 80s) that is part of that 1 - 2 percent. "No, not acceptable," was my answer to Davis.

The doctor interviewed in the above-mentioned radio show does acknowledge that the high-risk population should get the vaccine. However, he spent more time downplaying the virus than showing someone, like my dad, why they should respond by masking up and getting the vaccine. All my dad seemed to hear was, "This thing got really overblown."

It's tragic that it took a first-hand experience with Covid-19 for my dad to realize the severity of the coronavirus and to make an about-face in his views of vaccination. "I trust my doctor," he told his family when we spoke by phone.

"I didn't have to tell your dad anything...he figured this out on his own," Dr. Davis said.

As the virus ravaged his lungs, depriving him of oxygen, Dad didn't have a strong voice toward the end. He did manage to talk with close friends and family by phone, and shared with them some hard lessons learned.

He apologized to his friend Larry a couple of times for not being more understanding when he and his wife, Diane, had been sick with Covid early on in the pandemic. "He said, 'I'm sorry, we didn't know what this was.'" Larry also recalled my dad telling him that when he got out of the hospital, the first thing he was going to do was get vaccinated. The day my dad died, Larry shared that he and Diane went to get their booster shots.

My dad told his sister, Joyce, that, "I shouldn't have been so cavalier about the shot...I should have gotten it." Between that conversation with her brother and some other "God things" that subsequently took place, Joyce said she came to the conclusion that she should get vaccinated. She got the shot the Sunday before Dad's funeral.

### Timing is everything

"Do you think the monoclonal antibodies treatment could have helped my dad, like it helped my mom?" I asked Dr. Davis.

It's all conjecture, of course, but Davis said he would assume my parents had been infected at the same time. So, had my dad gone in with mom two days earlier, "there's a good chance he'd be having coffee with us today," Dr. Davis said.

He went on to explain that once a person is on oxygen (like my dad was), the monoclonal antibodies treatment is no longer effective. That's why it's so important to get tested early. **More important than that, however, would be to get vaccinated in the first place, Davis said.**

### Overwhelmed

"This has become a disease of un-immunized people," Dr. Davis said of Covid patients, going on to say that they are taking up most of the space at their 25-bed hospital in Wadena. This is true of health care facilities across the nation and medical staff are becoming overwhelmed and exhausted.

Among the misinformation about Covid-19, is the rumor that physicians are benefitting from the pandemic. Dr. Davis said he's been told by people that he receives \$20,000 for every one of his patients that's diagnosed with Covid. "Bologna," he said. In all actuality, he (and all medical staff) are working longer hours for the same pay because they are so busy with Covid cases.

He's been practicing medicine for over 35 years, Davis said. Now 62, he'd always thought he'd work until he was at least 70. Covid has caused him to rethink this. If the point ever comes that anti-vaxxers start protesting childhood immunizations, "Then I am done, I quit." Dr. Davis said.

I think back to my dad, a man of convictions and very strong-willed. I am not sure he would have believed anything Dr. Davis told him about the vaccine had he not gotten deathly sick. I tell the doctor I'm afraid this article will be met with deaf ears. You're probably right, he says, "but if one person's life is saved, it will be worth it."

### Going home

It was dad's wish to spend his last days at home. My mom rode in the ambulance with him the afternoon of Nov. 16, and she shared how Dad gave the driver directions along the way. "You take a right here," he said as they neared the familiar dirt road in Bullard Township, known for years simply as 'Route 2.'

We had his medical bed set up in front of the living room window so he could look out on the family acreage he'd named, 'Meadow's Edge,' years ago. The house had been built on land that was part of the farm he grew up on. His brother Russ, three years his senior, had lived at the old homeplace until his untimely death just a month earlier.

Hard to believe that just a short time ago we'd gathered in the field (which Russ had built into a golf course) to remember him and share stories. Dad led us in singing the old gospel song, "I'll fly away," his beautiful voice sounding strong and hopeful.

Now, it was barely a whisper. "I love our little house," he told his granddaughter Linnea as she sat by his side, holding his hand. He had connections

with each of his grandchildren that night, saying, "I don't deserve all this love."

Yes, Dad, you do, and your family lovingly gives it to you, regardless of the choice you made. But we can't ignore that your decision to not be vaccinated led to a night of horrors and a new reality that none of us were ready for.

Little did we know we'd need a crash course in nursing. We were grateful for the Lakewood Health System Hospice nurse, Nicole Theiler, who helped guide us into unfamiliar territory...administering morphine, using a gait belt, checking oxygen levels, monitoring the oxygen tank...all of which were delivered within a three-hour window before taking her leave. These advanced nursing tasks quickly overwhelmed us...we could barely concentrate as panic, sadness, confusion and fatigue clouded our ability to function as a nurse should.

Dad's breathing became increasingly labored as the hours went on, his oxygen level dropping to 35 in the wee hours of the morning. We were a mess and afraid. We frantically called our hospice nurse who calmly focused us and guided us through more comfort care for Dad, including administering another dose of morphine.

It didn't occur to us that dad was nearing death's door. Mom felt compelled to call their friend Pat, a retired nurse and ask for help. We are so grateful he was willing to drive out at 4 a.m. to offer support during a stressful time when hospice wasn't on site.

He quickly assessed the situation and with love, told us what we didn't want to hear - that the end was very near.

My sisters, mom and I weren't ready to say 'good-bye,' but we gathered at Dad's bedside, called out our love, and sang the chorus of his signature song, "Far Side Banks of Jordan," as he took his final breath the early morning of Nov. 17.

If only Dad had been vaccinated.

A U.S. Navy veteran, Dad was buried with full military honors. He would have loved to have heard the trumpet playing, 'Taps' at the graveside service.

Several people later told me how they'd witnessed a bald eagle circling over head as the two uniformed sailors folded the flag and handed it to my mother.

I like to think that God was smiling on this faithful servant and well-meaning, devoted patriot. Perhaps God was letting us know that even in death, Dad might be doing his American duty by helping even one person with the telling of his story.



## Saying 'goodbyes'

Each of Gary Schimpp's grandchildren (Linnea, Hayden, Christian and Sawyer) had the opportunity to spend time with their grandpa at what would be the last day of his life. Above, Linnea, 24, gives her grandpa a hug. Below, Sawyer, 10, holds his grandpa's hand. At left is Gary's wife of 60 years, Carmen.

